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ABSTRACT

The Office for Children in Massachusetts, created by a state law in 1972, is a unique approach to children's services. A strong point of the legislation creating the Office is a provision that mandates the establishment of local councils for children across the state. The Office for Children plans to establish 35 to 40 local councils. The local councils will have the power to review budgets and funding proposals, to evaluate and monitor programs, to develop information and referral services, and to make recommendations on needs and priorities regarding children's services. These recommendations will form the basis of the policies and priorities adopted. In addition to the local councils, a state-wide council on children will consist of representatives from each local council and enough additional appointments to insure strong consumer representation at the state level. The state-wide council will serve as a forum and advocate for issues that affect the common interests of children across the state. It is expected that at least half of the councils will be established by June 1973, and that all will be operating before the end of the year. One of the immediate goals of the Office is to stimulate the creation of local supportive services for children who are in immediate danger of institutionalization. Other responsibilities of the Office are: to set standards for all child care centers and systems, provide for inspections of facilities, review state budgets involving children's services and make recommendations, draw up guidelines for the development of day care services in the state, and others. (DB)

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THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN

A New Approach to the Development of Children's Services in Massachusetts

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The Office for Children

Despite a recognized need for more and better services to children in Massachusetts, advocates for children, both inside and outside of government, have been unable to make a significant impact on priorities or programs in the major state departments concerned with children. Services to children remain fragmented and uncoordinated with at least five major state departments having responsibility for meeting children's needs. Complex guidelines, inflexible operating procedures, and unrealistic demands on staff time have resulted in a bureaucracy which is often incapable of responding to children in crisis. Budgets and program decisions continue to slight children. A variety of children's interest groups across the state fight their own battles with government, often competing against each other for insufficient funds, and have been unable to organize into a concerted voice for the needs of children. Little solid data exists which can be used to document the extent of and need for children's services in the state. Parents have little voice in the planning, operation and evaluation of programs which directly affect their lives.

The Office for Children is the result of an effort to address these problems. This Office and the law which created it (Chapter 785, Acts of 1972) represent a unique approach to children's services among state governments across the nation.

What is the structure of the Office for Children? Is it just another bureaucracy?

A strong point of the legislation creating the Office for Children is a provision which mandates the establishment of local councils for children across the state. The Office has accepted the development of these councils as its highest priority during its first year of operation. The Office for Children's ability to effect changes in budgets, legislation, departmental policies, and new program development is dependent on these councils. Local councils can pull together fragmented interest groups, give children's services and needs more visibility, and generally create a

CONSTIUENCY FOR CHILDREN. THE COUNCILS CAN TAP GRASS ROOTS ORGANIZATIONAL ENERGY AND FUNNEL IT INTO THE CREATION OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN. THE KEY TO THIS STRENGTH WILL BE INFORMATION SHARING BETWEEN THE LOCAL COUNCILS AND THE OFFICE.

THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN PLANS TO ESTABLISH 35 TO 40 LOCAL COUNCILS. GENERAL COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP WILL BE OPEN TO ALL INTERESTED PERSONS IN EACH AREA AND WILL BE GENERATED THROUGH AN INTENSIVE PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD AMONG THE GENERAL MEMBERSHIP TO ESTABLISH PROVISIONAL BOARDS TO ACT AS DECISION-MAKING BODIES AND PUT THE LOCAL COUNCILS IN MOTION. THE OFFICE WILL REQUIRE THAT AT LEAST FIFTY PERCENT OF EACH BOARD CONSIST OF PARENTS AND CONSUMERS WHO HAVE NO FINANCIAL INTEREST IN PROVIDING SERVICES TO CHILDREN. THE LOCAL COUNCILS WILL HAVE THE POWER TO REVIEW BUDGETS AND FUNDING PROPOSALS, TO EVALUATE AND MONITOR PROGRAMS, TO DEVELOP INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICES, AND TO MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS ON NEEDS AND PRIORITIES REGARDING CHILDREN'S SERVICES. THESE RECOMMENDATIONS WILL FORM THE BASIS OF THE POLICIES AND PRIORITIES ADOPTED BY THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN.

IN ADDITION TO THE LOCAL COUNCILS, A STATE-WIDE COUNCIL ON CHILDREN WILL CONSIST OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM EACH LOCAL COUNCIL AND ENOUGH ADDITIONAL APPOINTMENTS TO INSURE STRONG CONSUMER REPRESENTATION AT THE STATE LEVEL. THE STATE-WIDE COUNCIL WILL SERVE AS A FORUM AND ADVOCATE FOR ISSUES WHICH AFFECT THE COMMON INTERESTS OF CHILDREN ACROSS THE STATE.

THE TASK OF ESTABLISHING THE CHILDREN'S COUNCILS IS WELL UNDERWAY. IT IS EXPECTED THAT AT LEAST HALF OF THE COUNCILS WILL BE ESTABLISHED BY JUNE 1973 AND THAT ALL WILL BE OPERATING BEFORE THE END OF THE YEAR.

WHAT CONTROL DOES THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN HAVE OVER THE QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS?

LICENSES AND STANDARDS

THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN SETS OPERATING STANDARDS FOR ALL DAY CARE CENTERS AND SYSTEMS, FAMILY DAY CARE, PLACEMENT AGENCIES, FOSTER CARE WHICH IS NOT SUPERVISED BY A PLACEMENT AGENCY, AND

GROUP CARE FACILITIES. THE OFFICE WILL DEVELOP AND REVISE REGULATIONS FOR ADMISSIONS, TRANSPORTATION, PHYSICAL PLANTS, STAFF, PROGRAMMING, HEALTH AND NUTRITION, RECORD KEEPING, ORGANIZATION, FINANCING, ADMINISTRATION, AND THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARENTS, CHILDREN AND STAFF. THE OFFICE WILL RELY ON RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LOCAL COUNCILS, PROPRIETORS, AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC IN ORDER TO FORM SOUND AND REALISTIC REGULATIONS.

THE OFFICE WILL ALSO SEE THAT ALL PRIVATE FACILITIES ARE INSPECTED REGULARLY AND WILL PROVIDE CONSULTATION TO HELP THEM MEET REQUIREMENTS. IN ADDITION, ALL STATE AGENCIES AND INSTITUTIONS SERVING CHILDREN WILL RECEIVE THE SAME SCRUTINY BY THE OFFICE, WHICH IS RESPONSIBLE FOR APPROVING THEM AND HELPING THEM MEET ITS STANDARDS. THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR LICENSING AND APPROVING PROGRAMS IS NOT JUST A CHORE FOR THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN, BUT RATHER AN IMPORTANT CONTROL OVER THE QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S CARE.

Budget Review

FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE MONITORING AND EVALUATING OF THE STATE'S SERVICES FOR CHILDREN ARE UNDER ONE ROOF AND ON THE WAY TOWARD A COORDINATED SYSTEM. FOR THIS ARRANGEMENT TO BE EFFECTIVE, THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN WILL RELY ON AND EVEN BE DIRECTED BY THE DILIGENCE AND ENTHUSIASM OF THE AREA COUNCILS.

THE OFFICE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR REVIEWING STATE BUDGETS THA INVOLVE CHILDREN'S SERVICES, AND FOR MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SECRETARY OF HUMAN SERVICES AND THE GOVERNOR. THIS WILL INVOLVE ANALYZING THE CHILD-RELATED PROGRAMS OF THE MENTAL HEALTH, YOUTH SERVICES, PUBLIC HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND PUBLIC WELFARE DEPARTMENTS, EXAMINING THEM IN TERMS OF QUALITY AND AVAILABILITY AND MAKING CONCRETE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNOR.

THE OFFICE HAS ACCESS TO BUDGET AND PLANNING INFORMATION OF ANY DEPARTMENT AND WILL MAKE THIS INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC. WITH THE HELP OF A WELL-INFORMED PUBLIC, THE OFFICE CAN FILL A POSITION THAT HAS BEEN VACANT FOR TOO LONG---THAT OF AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE FOR ADDITIONAL AND IMPROVED CHILDREN'S SERVICES. THE CLOSE TIES BETWEEN THE OFFICE AND LOCAL COUNCILS FOR CHILDREN ACROSS THE STATE WILL GIVE STRENGTH TO THIS VOICE.

What is the Project for Children?

One of the immediate goals of the Office for Children is to stimulate the creation of local supportive services for children in immediate danger of institutionalization. Too many parents have been frustrated when a state agency cannot provide supplementary services for a child with complex problems. Often such parents eventually face the difficult choice between sending the child to a state institution or keeping him at home with no supportive services at all.

The Project for Children is an outgrowth of a cooperative effort of the various state departments that offer children's services. It will attempt to fill the gaps between existing state agency programs by allowing private groups to develop local services which can begin to remove the need for institutions. Through the Project a nursery school might decide to include emotionally disturbed or physically handicapped children by branching into specialized or integrated day care services. A parent group might decide to form in-home counselling or emergency services to families of retarded or emotionally disturbed children. Other groups might develop programs for the physically or multi-handicapped, or for youthful offenders.

The proposals of groups wishing to be funded by the Project for Children will be approved by the local councils, where they exist. Councils will be provided technical assistance by a team consisting of an Office for Children regional director and staff on locan from other departments within Human Services.

Will the Office for Children provide alternatives to state institutions?

The Office for Children is committed to deinstitutionalization. By developing appropriate standards for care and treatment, budget review, and state agency coordination, the Office hopes to hasten the development of community alternatives to state institutions.

WHAT OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES DOES THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN HAVE?

THE OFFICE WILL NOT DIRECTLY BE RUNNING CHILDREN'S SERVICE PROGRAMS, BUT WILL USE AVAILABLE FEDERAL-STATE FUNDS TO PURCHASE SERVICES FROM PRIVATE AGENCIES. THE OFFICE WILL BE PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR ADVOCATING, STIMULATING, AND COORDINATING THE DEVELOPMENT AND CONTINUATION OF PROGRAMS THROUGHOUT THE COMMONWEALTH.

IN ORDER TO ACCOMPLISH THIS THE OFFICE WILL BE ACTIVE IN SEVERAL AREAS. FOR EXAMPLE, IT PLANS TO PROVIDE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND CONSULTATION FOR ANY PRIVATE GROUP OR PUBLIC AGENCY WISHING TO DEVELOP CHILDREN'S SERVICES. IN ADDITION, THE OFFICE WILL ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN DRAFTING LEGISLATION, TESTIFY BEFORE LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEES, AND INFORM GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS ON THE COUNCILS OF PENDING BILLS SO THAT THEY MAY BECOME ADVOCATES THEMSELVES.

THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN HAS A SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN REGARD TO DAY CARE. UNDER THE LEGISLATION THAT CREATED IT, THE OFFICE IS CHARGED WITH DRAWING UP GUIDELINES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF DAY CARE SERVICES IN EVERY REGION OF THE STATE. ANY STATE AGENCY WISHING TO SET UP DAY CARE SERVICES MUST CONFORM TO THESE GUIDELINES, WHICH WILL BE BASED ON PRIORITIES AND STANDARDS FORMULATED BY THE LOCAL COUNCILS. IN ADDITION, THE OFFICE WILL ADVOCATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF DAY CARE SERVICES THROUGHOUT THE STATE, INCLUDING PROGRAMS WHICH ALSO SERVE CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS. WITH ACTIVE, LOCAL INPUT THIS POLICY SHOULD RESULT INA MORE COORDINATED AND RESPONSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF DAY CARE IN EVERY COMMUNITY.

WHAT SHOULD A PARENT DO IF A CHILD IS NOT RECEIVING NEEDED SERVICES?

THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN HAS NO WAY OF IDENTIFYING ALL THE CHILDREN WHO NEED SERVICES. FOR THIS IT WILL DEPEND ON THE DILIGENCE OF LOCAL COUNCILS, INDIVIDUALS, AND PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

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AGENCIES WHO MAKE CONTACT WITH THEM. PARENTS, FOSTER PARENTS, AND SERVICE PROVIDERS ARE URGED TO CONTACT THEIR REGIONAL OFFICE OF THE OFFICE FOR CHILDREN, WHICH WILL BE OPERATING AN INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICE FOR CHILDREN IN THE REGION, IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE CENTRAL OFFICE.